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In 1885, the French Catholic Church celebrated a spectacular propaganda coup.

One of its fiercest critics, the anti-clerical writer Leo Taxille, had at last seen the light and was eager to tell the world about his conversion.

Above all, Taxille was determined to expose the grotesque and hateful network to which he had belonged since his teens, the diabolical world of Freemasonry.

The great architect of the masons, Taxille announced, was the devil.

Their lodges housed statues of goat-headed beasts. Their rituals involved bestial forms of carnality and prostitution, last seen in ancient Babylon.

The worst masons of all were the new reformed Palladians, led by a devil-worshipping lesbian called Sister Sophia Sappho.

In public, Sophia Sappho seemed a gentile spinster.

But in private, she would writhe with passion as she spat on a consecrated host before forcing a newly initiated sister to have sex with the sacramental bread stuffed up her vagina.

Published in a series of best-selling books, Taxille's revelations transfixed France.

He was invited to an audience with Pope Leo XIII, who told him that he had read every word.

And then, after 12 years of headlines, Taxille called a public meeting at the Geographical Society in Paris and revealed the truth.

So Dominic, as you will well know, that's a review by a top critic of the book The Craft, How the Freemasons Made the Modern World, by John Dickey,

who is Professor of Italian Studies at University College London, and that top critic was yourself.

Yes, so that is the ultimate Sunday Times review opening.

So that's the kind of thing that Literature of the Day loved.

He always used to say, loads of sex, please.

And so when I came across this in this wonderful book, it's one of those books, actually The Craft, it's called.

And it's one of those books where, as you read it, the scales kind of fall from your eyes.

Because I had always been interested in who were the Freemasons.

Where do they come from? What do they believe?

Because you yourself are a Freemason?

No, I'm absolutely not, Tom.

But as you are now going to say, of course, I would say that, wouldn't I?

If I was part of this diabolical conspiracy, as we will see, the truth that Taxille reveals is surprising, shall we say.

So are we going to reveal the truth now?

Or should we get the author of the book that we reviewed, who has very kindly agreed to come on the show and talk about Freemasons?

Should we get him to tell us what the truth was?

Great, we should. So John Dickie, thank you so much for joining us.

A wonderful book. Now, come on, Leo Taxille.

Was he telling the truth about Sister Sophia Sappho and the New Reform Palladians and the Devil or not?

Well, it's great to be here.

And I'm tempted to suggest that people read the book to find out.

Perhaps I'm not giving away too much by saying it was actually a gigantic hoax.

I mean, one of the biggest hoaxes in modern history that had certainly had large parts of the Catholic Church fooled and lasted 12 years

and tells us a lot about this still ongoing paranoia that the Catholic Church has about Freemason.

But there'll be lots of people listening to this who will say, OK, fine.

Well, it wasn't, you know, OK, maybe the Freemasons aren't devil worshipping lesbians.

But there are still all kinds of mysterious things.

It's a network that, you know, people of our generation always talk about the police in Britain that has infiltrated this institution, that institution.

So when you come to write about it as a historian, to what extent were you yourself?

You know, how much of that did you have in your head?

Because you've written about the mafia before, haven't you?

So you're very good on shadowy, sinister organizations.

Yeah, I came to it through the mafia, really, because I'd been on radio a lot, TV a lot, talking about the mafia.

And when asked to define the mafia, I did exactly the way Sicilian mafiosi do.

And I said, well, it's like a Freemasonry for criminals.

And I got a message from the head of communications at the United Grand Lodge of England at the end of the day,

saying, would you like to come in for a chat because our members are up in arms?

So I went along and had a chat with them and did the tour of the museum.

And based on what I already kind of knew about Freemasonry in the Italian context,

particularly, I realized there was a big story there because there are really only two narratives out there about the Freemasons.

One is the sort of, either it's a conspiracy theory or it's a sort of grubby cabal,

the kind of story we grew up with, all on the other story that you have out there is the Freemasons version,

which is it's all a noble and misunderstood tradition of brotherhood and charity work and that sort of thing.

And both of those stories have some elements of truth in them, depending on where you go in history and where you go across the world, because Freemasonry is a global phenomenon.

But there's an awful lot in the middle that neither of those stories captured and that is huge fun.

I mean, I've never had so much fun writing a book as I did writing this one.

But the other mystery that I've always kind of been aware of and never until I read your book, probably got to handle on is the origins, because the origin story the Freemasons themselves say, I mean, it goes back to the time of Solomon and Mason's building the temple in Jerusalem and somehow the Templars fit in and they worship ahead of a demon called Baphomet and somehow the Illuminati are there as well.

And that great swirl of historically themed conspiracy theories, the Freemasons seem to be sat right

in the middle of it.

And I'm guessing that in part, the kind of the secrecy of that is, I mean, it's a huge part of the fund for the Freemasons.

But also, what is the actual history of how the Freemasons came to being?

Presumably it doesn't go back to the Middle Ages, let alone back to the time of Solomon.

No, I mean, you really need to look at two moments that were the key moments in the development of Freemasonry.

One was the court of James the Sixth of Scotland, future James the First of England at the very end of the 16th century,

when you had a sort of law, L-O-R-E, of stone masons.

Stone masons had created their own sort of corporate mythology, if you like,

that included all of these things like Euclid and Solomon's Temple and, you know, all of that sort of stuff.

And in a very interesting political move, a man called William Shore, S-C-H-A-W,

who was James the First's basically minister of works, minister of public works,

made a kind of alliance with these senior stone masons who were building things like, you know, James's new chapel at Stirling Castle.

And introduced them, it seems, to certain versions of Renaissance philosophy, classical philosophy, and particularly the art of memory, which I'm sure you know all about.

The idea that, you know, you memorize a speech by visualizing going through a whole building with various things like an interesting floor,

a memory palace or a columns here and pictures there and that kind of thing.

And in the Renaissance, the Renaissance philosophy of Hermeticism, that became a sort of portal to the secrets of the universe.

And William Shore introduced these stone masons to this mythology, to this, sorry, this Renaissance philosophy,

as a sort of flattering overture, if you like, and promised to help them organize themselves.

And that suited their sort of, they had to become a stone mason.

You had to memorize quite a lot in terms of the mythology and so on and so forth.

It helped them organize their initiation rituals.

It gave, it turned that the cells of their organization that they called lodges into theaters of memory.

And if you go to a Masonic lodge today, a Masonic temple, you will see a chessboard floor.

You will see columns and globes and various symbols moving around that are a memoir,

they're mnemonics to help you negotiate your way through the long and complicated rituals.

And the new and exciting idea was that this had a kind of philosophical content,

that this was giving you access to some kind of truth, whether it be an ethical truth or a philosophical truth,

all sorts of different kinds of truth have been superimposed on that.

So that's the one moment.

And at that moment, it becomes fashionable gentlemen start to join these lodges of stone masons in search of fashionable intellectual concerns of the age.

And it spreads around the country, albeit in very sort of small and low key forms.

And by country, you mean Britain or just Scotland?

It enters England.

I mean, one of the main vehicles seems to have been Scottish forces involved in the Civil War, the Civil Wars.

And it's by the beginning of the 18th century, it's kind of national, but rather uncoordinated, it seems

And then we get the second big moment, which is in 1717, when a group of four lodges come together

to found what's called a grand lodge, a sort of supervisory body to enforce the rules, and decide who is legitimately a freemason and who isn't.

At this time, they're beginning to call themselves freemasons.

And a freemason is someone who works freely with stone rather than kind of lavishly cutting, is that right?

That's the origins of the word.

But it has many meanings in the sources.

It keeps its original meaning, which is the guy who elaborately shapes the stone

and then hands it over to a guy to just bung it in a wall or a church or whatever.

But I think the connotations of freedom and so on were helpful in its becoming the name for the freemasons.

Because by the beginning of the 18th century, freemasonry has separated it off from any real concrete.

In fact, that foundation of the grand lodge in 1717 seems to have been a key moment in that process, separated itself off from any of that stone masonry stuff.

And the accoutrements of the stone mason, the gloves, the apron, the set squares, the lead weight things,

all of those sorts of tools stop being tools of stone masons

and just become part of the metaphorical kit of these rituals, of these Masonic rituals.

So John, they meet at the Goose and Gridiron pub since 1717, don't they, to hammer it out.

And Tom and I were discussing this beforehand.

I said to him that it's a bit like the foundation of the Football Association hammering out common rules.

And Tom said, well, it's actually his 18th century, so it's more like the rules of cricket.

But there is a sense of that, isn't there, that there's a sort of, you know, you were talking about gentlemen earlier,

that these are actually quite well-born, well-educated, well-off people who are coming together to create the rules of a...

It's not guite a game, but it's a kind of ritual, isn't it?

And they do regard it, I think one of the things that comes through from your book is they regard it as fun from the beginning,

that that's an important part of it.

It's a kind of that sort of brotherhood element is actually quite jolly rather than sinister.

Yeah, absolutely. It's part of that 18th century world of clubs and all of that sort of thing, very, very much part of that.

In a way, the most successful and long-lasting part of that.

And, you know, the comparison with sort of cricket or whatever also stands up in the sense that, you know, through the Empire,

it's then spread around the globe, particularly once you've got a rule book set up in 1723.

Yeah, boozing and drinking and so on has always been an absolutely key part of Freemasonry.

Also, the lack of women is also another very distinctive 18th century club aspect.

Yeah, that's right. I mean, the Masons have always been quite rightly, I think, given a hard time for this.

But that rule book from 1723, the Andersons constitutions, as it's known, the constitutions of the Freemasons,

is the first to actually officially say, look, you can't have any women, can't have any slaves, can't have any, you know, whatever.

And that's created a lot of problem that, you know, as you'll know from the book, there are versions of Freemasonry

that have incorporated women in various forms, right up to kind of full, equal membership, mixed logits.

But the norm is still, I think, very, you know, male.

This is a book, as I said, about male eccentricity and their history.

Although you do introduce someone who may have been female, or maybe not, who is the Chevalier d'Aion.

who is, I guess, representative of the spread of Freemasonry from England across the channel. And the Chevalier d'Aion is either a man who dresses as a woman, or a woman who dresses as a woman, pretends to be a man, and somehow become a mason.

Yeah, no, it created obviously great hilarity.

The Masons have all, as well as having a good time themselves, have always provoked enormous laughs among everybody else because of that strange,

you know, rolling their trouser legs up and bearing their chests and all that kind of stuff.

And a major course of hilarity during the 18th century was this story of the Chevalier d'Aion, who was basically a French spy, a French government agent, and kind of scandalous, who ended up joining a lodge in London.

And for whatever reasons, again, the story is complicated, it depends who you believe,

started dressing as a woman and actually claiming to be a woman,

and eventually would be welcomed into the bosom of Freemasonry back in France.

Yes, where they did allow, they did have a form of female Freemasonry at the time,

the so-called adoption lodges.

But in the meantime, there was a huge betting market opened about whether the Chevalier d'Aion really was or wasn't a woman.

And eventually, I think probably because of bribery, somebody was, a witness came up and said, well, I actually had sex with the Chevalier d'Aion, she's definitely a woman.

And yeah, the truth wouldn't be revealed until he died.

And we found out that she was anatomically male.

Wow. So I'll tell you a strange thing that I had never realised before reading your book, was that Freemasonry was linked to wiggory.

So there's loads of wigs, it's sort of the Robert Walpole era.

So is it a sort of political patronage group at this stage?

Well, kind of everything is in the 18th century.

But yes, I mean, they absolutely, particularly because of the secrecy code they've got, which I think we probably need to get into at some stage.

They need the protection of the wigg elite.

What I think happened, and it's still, you know, opinions are divided among historians, what I think happened with the setting up of that Grand Lodge,

was that was effectively a kind of wig coup within Freemasonry.

And they elbowed out the Tories who'd previously been in charge, you know,

the fate of Christopher Wren, who had been, it seems to have been a kind of figurehead of the exception as Freemasonry was called kind of in London before.

Because he was an architect. I mean, he was literally building temples.

Yes, absolutely. Yeah, and all of, you know, many, many of the builders,

the contractors and people that he used in building St Paul's and all the other churches were Freemasons, were members of this thing called the exceptions,

as was Christopher Wren's son and so on and so forth.

And I think what happens in the, you know, transition into the wig regime is that they kind of want to move on from that Tory version of Freemasonry, create a new version.

So, John, does that association of Freemasonry with kind of wiggish principles of liberty and freedom and enlightenment thought,

does that explain its success on the continent,

where there's this kind of Anglo-menia, this fascination with England as,

you know, Voltaire comes here and says that it's the great home of liberty.

Is that part of what explains its success?

Definitely, I think so. You know, Freemasonry is a kind of vehicle of enlightenment values again and again, and it's not just in, you know, when it's first exported to France, that people see it as something modern.

But again and again, you know, we see it in the early republic in the United States or in the early movement for Indian independence,

it seems to be off for itself as a very good school of modern politics

and of the kind of skills and values that you need to take part in a modern state.

So, all that sort of supreme being stuff and all the quite vague.

Well, the simultaneously very detailed but also kind of vague religious stuff.

My sense is that that's a product of the Enlightenment

and it's designed for an age where they don't want sectarian passions

to sort of, you know, people arguing all the time about high and low church and Catholic and Protestants and stuff.

And this is a good way of smoothing that over.

But it's also, it is very wiggish and very enlightened and very mid,

it's essentially, you can absolutely see where it appealed to the founding fathers

of the United States, for example, can you?

Yeah, no, that's absolutely right.

You know, we better come on to the secrets.

Am I allowed to say the secrets online?

I can see you're itching to tell us that.

Because, you know, Freemasons swear the most terrifying oaths during their rituals to maintain the secrets of Freemasons.

Do we know what these oaths are?

Because presumably they have to keep the secret.

Oh, yeah, yeah. No, you can feign them online.

You know, yes, you've got to keep them secret and it all happens in a secret place and it's all hidden by symbols and stuff like that.

But once you strip all of the, you know, the kind of funny walks and oaths and all that out of the way.

I love the quote you give of what was in Custos, Portuguese.

Was he Portuguese? I can't remember.

He was London based, but he was a Huguenot.

Yes, who gets kind of abducted by the Inquisition in Portugal

and tortured and confesses to all kinds of stuff and then comes back.

And he thinks that basically the secrecy is just a way of getting people to join.

As secrecy, naturally excited curiosity,

this prompted great numbers of persons to enter into this society.

So the secrecy is basically a marketing tool.

Among other things, it's a very good marketing tool.

But the secrets, once, you know, you get three main rituals

to really begin your career as a Freemason.

The entered apprentice, the fellow craft and the master Mason ritual.

Once you've been through those, you are a Freemason in the full sense of the word.

And each one of those has this terrifying secret that you're supposed to learn.

And the first one that you learn in the entered apprentice, you know,

after all of this palaver of blindfolding and swords pointed at your breasts

and all of this kind of stuff, is that you've got to be a nice chap.

And the second secret at the end of the fellow craft ritual, again,

lots of palaver, is that it's a good idea to find out more about the world.

And the third secret, you can tell I'm not a Freemason, of course,

because I would say this to you.

Yeah, of course you would. Yeah, we're not falling for that.

It's probably as good a proof as you're going to get

if somebody gives away the secrets like this.

But you can find them on the internet anyway.

Anyway, and the third secret after the master Mason ritual,

which is an extraordinary bit of theatre, you know,

you're sort of ritually beaten to death by other Freemasons

and then sort of zipped into a body bag and carried around the lodge building

and then symbolically revived by this sort of Masonic manhug.

And the secret you learn at the end of all of this

is that death is guite a serious business

and it kind of makes you think a bit.

So, in other words, the secrets are just towering, towering banalities.

And that tells us a number of things.

One is that's guite ingenious

rather than making some terrifying political or theological secret,

the truth, the secret.

They're making this kind of empty form of secrecy,

which is open to everybody.

Nobody can disagree with these whatever religious faith you are

and so on and so forth.

They're a vehicle of tolerance.

But what they do do is borrow the whole kind of aura of secrecy

and mystery of secrecy to create a certain sort of quasi-religious feeling

around the rituals and around Freemasonry

and that sense of sacredness around their rituals

while not treading on anybody's toes.

And is that why it's so popular with the founding fathers

who like that kind of watered down deist kind of approach to things, do you think?

Yes, exactly.

I mean, it works very well for them.

There were Freemasons on both sides in the American War of Independence.

You know, the military is full of Freemasons on both sides.

But it's really once they set about, you know,

setting up the rules of the Republic and Washington in place

that Washington particularly, who was a Freemason, sees,

well, look, this is a really, we haven't got religion to legitimate what we're doing.

And all the lessons of history are that republics don't work.

We know that, you know, wherever you are, particularly in classical history,

Republic, it's going to collapse into anarchy or tyranny sooner or later.

So what we need is something to give us a sense of sacredness

without having any particular religious kind of input, without offending anybody.

And the Freemasons are perfectly fitted for that task.

So that's why Washington is very public about his Freemasonry when he's president

and why he, for example, in the laying of the cornerstone of the Capitol building in Washington.

It's a ceremony I kind of reconstruct in the book.

You know, this is, you know, Washington, he knows this city is going to carry his name.

He knows that it's going to have a big statue of him at the center.

And, you know, at the moment, it's just a plan drawn out in the mud on the banks of the Potomac.

And yet he uses a Masonic ceremony.

And the Freemasons are very good at ceremonies and rituals and all that stuff.

To give this sense of sacredness here, we're founding something really important.

And, you know, when reports of that reach around the country, it really sets off this fashion for Freemasonry and for Masonic cornerstone laying ceremonies in the early American Republic. And what about the dollar bill?

So that's something that comes up on, if you spend any time on social media,

that kind of thing comes up again and again that, you know, it's part of a globalist conspiracy and has been from the beginning, the eye, what is it?

The eye of Providence or whatever it's called, a kind of what it's called.

You know, the pyramid, all that stuff.

Is the genuine sort of Masonic influence going on there?

Yeah, what better evidence do you need of a global conspiracy

than the fact that they're advertising it on the dollar bill?

No, that didn't, it was originally, that symbol, the pyramid with the all seeing eye,

was at some point the obverse of the seal of state.

And that was, I forget, in the 1780s sometime, that was early 1790s was kind of put in place.

But at the time, it wasn't a Masonic symbol.

And as far as we know, none of the people who designed it were Freemasons.

No, it gets incorporated onto the dollar bill under FDR in the 30s.

And FDR, when this design, using this new design for the dollar was proposed,

which, you know, resurrected, if you like, this obverse of the seal of state

as part of the design of the dollar bill, he was a Freemason.

He was a 32nd degree Freemason.

But he was actually really worried that that would kind of offend his Catholic base

because by this time, the Freemasons who have been hoovering up symbols left, right and centre,

nothing, masons like more than symbols, and there will get them from anywhere.

Hence the confusion about their origins, because the Templars, you know, ancient Egypt,

it's all good, it all makes for good ceremonies.

So he wanted to actually check that his Catholic base wouldn't be offended

if he put a sort of what some might interpret as a masonic symbol on the dollar bill, and he was reassured.

Unfortunately, he wasn't to know about the conspiracy theories that would grow up around it much later.

Well, so talking of conspiracy theories and Catholic dislike of Freemasonry,

which we open the episode with, we should come to that, I think, in the second half,

look at the role that Freemasonry is supposed to have played in the French Revolution

and the role it definitely plays in kind of polarizing Catholic and secular opinion in France in the 19th century.

So we will come back and talk about that after the break.

Do you know, Dominic, I was going to try and do the aria of The Queen of the Night from Mozart's opera The Magic Flute, which I gather, John, maybe you could confirm this supposition,

is about a masonic rituals.

It's kind of Mozart's version of the rituals that you go through.

Anyway, my voice isn't up to singing the aria of The Queen of the Night.

If any of our listeners, by the way, want to accept that, put it as a little clip on social media, I'm not going to stop them.

Yeah, my reading of that is that basically Mozart was like his mate Haydn, was a Freemason.

And he definitely Freemasonry influenced The Magic Flute.

But being a good Freemasonry, he wasn't going to give away the masonic secret.

So what he produces is a sort of very strong, very recognizable masonic flavor

while giving him sort of a bit of deniability about it.

Just before we come to the French Revolution, which I know Tom said we were going to talk about just before the break.

For all those people, George Washington, Mozart, all these people in the 18th century,

am I right in thinking that for them joining the Masons is, you know, it's fun, there's the rituals,

it's open to everybody, it's tolerant, it's kind of enlightened.

It's a bit like joining a private members club today if you're a kind of hipster.

Is there a bit of truth in that, that it's kind of cool and you meet lots of interesting people,

but there's no great, you know, there's no metaphysical importance to you necessarily.

It's not an existential thing to be a Mason or am I underplaying it?

Well, I think you are underplaying it a little bit.

I mean, you have to remember that people join Freemasonry for lots of different reasons and it means different things to different people, you know,

in the same way that the secrets are a kind of empty center

that then lead people to imagine and project all sorts of things on to them,

whether they're Masons or non-Masons.

You know, there are different ways of living out your Freemasonry.

Certainly the 18th century, you know, it felt very modern and temporary.

It's also about status, you know, there's lots of badges and stages to go through

and, you know, as Freemasonry went on, they invented, you know, they didn't just have,

there were just two degrees when Freemasonry started off.

Then they add in another one and then this growth became kind of exponential

and that because people love the badges of status, the kind of the ceremony,

they're all, you know, the sense of belonging.

So it's, you get status that is not the same as the status you would have in the outside world,

but is a kind of refracted version of it and that, you know, so there's all sorts of aspects.

But in cases, kind of it raises status, doesn't it?

Because the gloves that Masons wear are designed to ensure that you can't know

whether you're shaking the hand of a Duke or a dustman, I read in your book.

Yeah, that's what that's the conventional explanation within Freemasonry.

Certainly there's a sort of utopian egalitarian vibe.

The idea of brotherhood, you know, if I'm an ordinary member of a lodge

and so is, you know, the Duke of Kent, in theory, we are just brothers.

You know, we are equal, formally equal and that's very exciting.

That sort of temporary suspension of the rules of the outside world.

So liberty, equality and fraternity.

And so you could, I guess, see why in 1797, a Catholic abbey

wrote about the revolution that everything in the French Revolution,

everything right down to the most appalling deeds was foreseen, premeditated, arranged, resolved upon and decided.

Everything was caused by the deepest wickedness because everything was prepared and directed by men

who alone held the thread uniting the intrigues that had long been woven within the secret society.

The idea that these principles that the French Revolution flaunt

are actually deriving from Freemasonry and it's all a kind of scam

and is a veil covering what is in fact deep wickedness.

And this is a Catholic theme that runs right the way through the 19th century

and it's what Leo Taxil is basically exploiting.

Yes, absolutely right.

I mean, we owe the birth of the conspiracy theory in its modern form.

You know, the idea of the secret elite behind the scenes controlling everything,

that fantasy we owe to Catholic fear of Freemasonry.

You know, the idea that somehow it's just a front,

that there's some demonic purpose behind it, that fear,

which is systematized as you said by this guy, the Abbey Bachwell,

who's, you know, sitting in his house on the Edgeware Road in London,

in exile from the French Revolution,

trying to make sense of the consternation caused by the French Revolution,

the overthrowing of throne and altar.

It's got to be a conspiracy.

Somebody's got to be to blame and it's got to be the Freemasons,

who the Pope had excommunicated as long ago as 1738.

And that idea becomes very, very contagious

and the Freemasons are perfect for it,

because they've got this sort of Russian doll.

Firstly, they've got their code of secrecy, you know,

and they may well say, oh no, honestly, there's really nothing to it.

They would say that, wouldn't they?

And then even the structural ends itself to this,

this Russian doll thing of, you know, ever higher degrees

and the myth that was created was that this was all kind of machinery

that was depriving people of their free will

until they became sort of Satanist robots

by the time they got to the high...

Deceiving everyone.

Yes, exactly, by the time of the higher degrees

and it was all aimed at, you know, overthrowing throne and altar,

bringing about exactly what happened, you know, under the Jacobins.

But there's a tiny degree of,

so in the first half we were talking about how Freemasonry was identified

with Enlightenment principles, with tolerance,

with free thinking, with brotherhood, erasing distinctions,

you know, underneath the gloves, whatever.

So when the Abbey Barrowell says,

oh, well, this is all a result of Freemasonry,

there's a pitiful, minuscule little germ of sense there, is there?

Yeah, I think so.

I mean, even if you take Freemasonry at face value,

you know, for what it is in the 18th century,

it looks deeply, deeply dodgy.

You know, it's a centre of aggregation,

away from the court, away from, you know, free thinking.

So, you know, it's subversive and heretical

and therefore even in it's the most innocent interpretation

of it for the church is positively dangerous.

Does the Catholic Church have a sense of it as being from Britain,

being in that sense Protestant or not?

Yeah, I think so.

I mean, it's also, it would soon become associated with Judaism

and all sorts of, you know, anything and everything that they didn't like.

I think primarily for them it's heretical,

because what happens is the Freemasonry,

and it has its roots in all of the most ancient heresies,

you know, the Manicheans and all of these people.

So, basically they're buying into what the Freemasons are saying.

I mean, are they thinking that it comes from Babylon and from...

Yeah, that's exactly it.

The Templars or whatever, you know,

as we all know, ended up rather badly.

That's the point.

The Freemasons have gone round during the 18th century

assembling these vast sort of museum of symbols,

display cases of symbols that they can use to say,

you know, to show that they're very ancient

and they go back to the Old Testament or whatever it is

and they've given them all these symbols

for the sort of mise-en-scène of their ritual performances.

And all the Abbey Barwell and those who followed him had to do

would say, well, Manichaean is clearly heresy.

You know, the Templars, good grieve, devil worshipers, Baphomet.

So, they take the irony of this.

Of course, they take the Mason's version of their own history

at face value and just, you know...

Yeah, because we did some various episodes on the Cathars and how essentially the notion of Catharism was invented in the 19th century by nervous Catholic writers. And I guess that this is all part of that swirl and mix. But meanwhile, while all this palaver is going on in France, in the British Empire, it seems to be, does seem to be playing a role slightly analogous to cricket.

So, we mentioned this before.

But it is being taken out, say, to India and just as Indians start to play cricket.

and just as Indians start to play cricket and it becomes a game where Indians and British can meet on the playing field.

So, in India, the whole idea of brotherhood and the erasure of race and religion and things like that, means that these lodges become places where

British and Indians can meet and become Masons, is that right? Meet on the level in Masonic jargon.

Yeah, that's absolutely right.

I mean, Freemasonry does so much work for the British Empire.

For a start, it's a kind of welfare system for imperialists and a social network.

You can be, if you're an imperial soldier, particularly,

or a sailor, or if you're a bureaucrat  $\,$ 

or a merchant, whatever it is,

you can find a kind of home from home,

the familiar, you can find a welcome.

Your Masonic credentials are your passport

to a world of mutual support  $\,$ 

and social life and a bit of fun and so on and so forth.

So, that is very important.

But then, you're absolutely right.

There is this element of kind of allowing the native elites a bit of conditioned access.

You can check them beforehand to check they're okay, but particularly if they're politically useful, like whatever various members of the Indian elite are, you can bring them on board and flatter them and flatter them with this sort of formalized, a quality that you get on the playing field or indeed in the Masonic Lodge.

You have this brilliant stat,

and I'm coaching for your wonderful book.

By the outbreak of the First World War,

there were at least 10 brothers in India who put Maharaja,

the occupation column of the Lodge Register.

And Kipling said the man who would be king

starts with a whole section about masonry there, isn't it?

Brother this, brother that.

They're all kind of shaking hands

and giving each other the wink and stuff.

Yeah, yeah.

I mean, the two rascals are at the center of the man who would be king,

kind of our Freemasons and use Masonic rituals

to create a bit of woo-woo kind of authority around their reign.

And Kipling, of course, you know, arch-imperialist

and the great poet and writer of Imperial Freemason.

And the hatred, going back to Tom's point about the hatred,

the anti-Masonic conspiracy theories,

they are extraordinarily long-lived within Catholic societies, aren't they?

So, I mean, one thing that I find,

I've always found absolutely mystifying is that Franco,

so after the Spanish Civil War,

or during the Spanish Civil War,

Franco is completely obsessed with masons.

And there's all kinds of...

Well, he got a blackball, didn't he?

Well, there's all kinds of anti-Masonic legislation, isn't there?

I mean, really virulent other that many masons in Spain.

Wasn't he blackballed by his own brother?

Yeah, that's the theory, you know, we don't know.

And his brother, who later disappeared in a, you know,

in a suspicious plane crash.

But let's not go down that rabbit hole.

Yeah, I mean, there's a lot said about, you know,

the masons themselves love to talk about their martyrs, if you like,

and they love to tell stories of their oppression

and how the world has misunderstood them.

And the key baddies in their narratives are the Nazis,

who did indeed ban Freemasonry in 1935.

But actually much, much worse than Hitler

when it came to, you know, clamping down on Freemasonry

was Franco, as you say.

I mean, the Spanish military at the time,

and anybody from a Catholic background in Spain at the time, and imbibed very, very profound hatred and suspicion of Freemasonry. You know, the culture wars that we saw in 19th century Catholic Europe that led to that taxil hoax, you know, the sort of free thinking taxil taking the mick out of the church's obsession with Freemasonry were particularly virulent in Spain. And that Catholic anti-Masonry is really the reason why Franco was much more brutal in repressing Freemasons than were either Mussolini or Hitler, who both, all the same, did abolish Freemasonry. Yeah, Franco, I mean, it was fed information for a long time by this group, sort of secret network, that claimed to be, you know, from some deep throat inside the international Masonic conspiracy. It goes on from pretty much the end of the Spanish Civil War right until the mid-60s, I think. And they're telling me, yeah, they're out to get you, and, you know, when Truman becomes... And who were they? Well, we don't really know who was behind this. I mean, it was all completely fake information. They'd been making up, you know, bulletins from Masonic Central Command internationally, and, you know, letters from Truman or whoever it might be, or Roosevelt, and Churchill, making all this intelligence up to feed Franco's poor and paranoia. And the best guess is that they were just using it to kind of get at enemies within the regime. But Franco also set up this special tribunal to repress, to put Freemasons on trial. I mean, minimum sentence, 12 years for membership of Freemasonry. Or, indeed, of, you know, any of the Masonic, supposed Masonic front organisations, like the Rotary Club or...

The Rotary Club?

Yeah, or Speaking Esperanto or anything like that

made you a Freemason.

And in the end, although, you know,

there were at most 1,000 former Freemasons left in Spain

at the time, there were 80,000 Freemasons listed.

And you can still visit...

I visited the kind of archives in Salamanca

where they have all these paranoid records

of Franco's regime.

And there's a terrible museum, isn't there,

with awful waxworks in Salamanca?

Yeah, that's right, because, of course,

like all of these authoritarian regimes,

they claimed that they finally, finally, finally

were able to expose the secrets of Freemasonry.

And so when they raided and closed down the lodges,

they kind of pinched the best bits of kit from the lodges,

filled up these showcase propaganda lodges

with all this material with sort of dummies in cloaks

and things like that, and said,

oh, you see, you know, demonic conspiracy,

that's what they're at.

And they made great visitor exhibits.

It's not difficult to make Freemasonry look kind of macabre

and weird, because a lot of the rituals have kind of death

and skulls and coffins and all of that sort of stuff in.

So that's Spain.

What about Italy?

Because, of course, in Italy, I mean,

you've written about the mafia,

particularly in the 1970s with the P2 lodge,

which is this sort of ultra-right-wing breakaway lodge

that's in, if you read any sort of slightly conspiracy theory book

about 70s, 80s, Italy, P2 are controlling everything.

They're involved with the Vatican Bank,

the death of Roberto Calvi, who's hanging.

Where's he hanging from?

A bridge on Blackfriars Bridge, isn't he?

So he was a banker working for the Vatican.

God's banker.

God's banker?

Wasn't he God's banker?

Yes, that's right.

And he was a member of P2.

Is that true?

Yeah.

I mean, this is where, you know,

this is really where the most, perhaps not Satanist,

but the most outlandish conspiracy theory

has actually proved to be true.

P2 is a kind of limit case of real conspiracy.

And what happened basically is this guy, Licio Gelli,

who was a former fascist, basically.

Freemasonry is in deep trouble in Italy in the post-world period

because both of the dominant political parties,

the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats,

are both anti-Masonic.

They both won't let Freemasons join them.

There's an article in the New Italian Constitution

that banned secret societies

without explicitly mentioning the Freemasons.

So the Freemasons are worried and they really want to get back

to their glory days in the 19th century

when they were very influential in Italy.

And this guy, Licio Gelli, comes along and says,

look, you know, I've got loads of really important friends

and I can make sure they come into Freemasonry

and we can do something really,

you know, like back in the old days,

because back in the old days,

all the elite Freemasons in Italy belong to this lodge

called Lodge Propaganda,

which was right under the control of the Grand Master

of the Grand Orient of Italy, almost his personal lodge.

So they weren't bothered by ordinary Freemasons

asking them for favors or, you know, selfies or whatever they did

and back in those days.

And Gelli eventually took control of this,

re-engineered it,

and turned it into his personal kind of patronage

and blackmail engine,

which he, you know, he funded right-wing terrorism,

he laundered money for the mafia,

he, you know, the whole series of scandals

where he brought corrupt people together.

And so how did the Vatican and Calvi fit into all this?

Well, Calvi was, at the time, in an unconnected development.

Oh, unconnected.

The church was looking to get money

to fund its anti-communist activities in Eastern Europe,

you know, Pope John Paul and all that.

And so Vatican money was going in

and also mafia money and all mingling around

in these dodgy banks,

which were really the center of the P2 system.

And they were the sort of financial lung of what Gelli did.

They allowed him to offer, you know,

offer to lend money on mates' rates terms

to trouble businesses in return for them

joining and lending support and building the empire.

I mean, a lot of Gelli's power was based on bullshit,

basically. You know, there's a story,

I don't know whether it's true or not,

but it ought to be true.

There's a guy called Alighiero Noscese,

who was the sort of Mike Yawood of Italy of the time.

He was the great impersonator.

Like you, Tom.

Yes, exactly.

And he was found to be a member of P2,

although he died before it was discovered.

And the theory is that when, you know,

a potential member would come in,

Gelli would get this guy to call and put him on speakerphone.

And Noscese would pretend to be, I don't know,

Giulio Andreotti or the interior minister

or somebody really well.

And so, ah, Giulio, my mate, you know,

what can I do for you and all this kind of thing?

Well, here's a scam for us.

Exactly.

But if that story is not true, and it probably isn't,

I'm afraid he gives some idea of how, you know,

Gelli loved to boast about all his contacts.

because of course that attracted more influential contacts

into his network.

And that all came apart in the late 70s, early 80s.

Is that right?

It was all exposed when the best particular bank collapsed.

Calvi was found.

Who was handling the money was found,

hanged in London.

Yeah.

Hanged, probably hanged by the mafia,

not by the Freemasons.

We still don't know.

I mean, you know, it seems to be the most likely explanation

that the mafia were a bit angry because all their money

had gone up the spout.

Right.

But we don't know.

We don't know.

But yeah, it was in 1981, I think it was,

that the raid discovered the membership lists

and lots of other compromising material in his office

in Arezzo and Tuscany.

Should we end on a slightly more wholesome note,

because obviously we don't want to give the impression

that Freemasons are actually all involved in conspiracy

and people hanging in bridges and things.

So I thought one of the sweetest things in your book

was the discovery that not only had Buzz Aldrin

being a Freemason, but that he had got special permission

from the Grand Lodge of Texas to set up a lodge on the moon.

Yes.

So Tranquillity Lodge.

Tranquillity Lodge on the moon, exactly.

It's still there if you care to visit, I'm sure.

But if the Chinese get to the moon,

they won't be able to go there, will they?

Because it's illegal in China.

Exactly.

Yeah, they'll have to stay well clear.

But also, there are lots of implausible people,

I mean, American basketball players and things.

Shaquille O'Neal.

Clive Lloyd, the great West Indies cricket captain.

Shaquille O'Neal, yeah, Clive Lloyd, exactly.

And it does have an appeal among African-Americans, doesn't it?

A surprising appeal among African-Americans.

Yeah, the chapters about this state

were the ones that I most enjoyed writing,

because despite Freemasonry's sort of enlightenment,

cradle of racial, religious and social tolerance

and so on and so on,

the United States really writes since the foundation

of the American Republic.

Freemasonry has been divided along racial lines

because of racism, basically.

The earliest black Freemasons.

among whom was a man called Prince Hall,

were prohibited from joining

and founded their own tradition,

now known as Prince Hall Freemasonry.

And Prince Hall Freemasonry has an extraordinary record

of involvement in the fight against slavery,

the first black troops to fight in the Civil War in 1863

were recruited and most of their NCOs were Prince Hall Freemasons.

Wow.

The Civil Rights Movement is full of Freemasons.

The NAACP was largely funded by Masonic donations,

Thurgood Marshall,

who led the sort of Brownverse of the Board of Education case,

was a Prince Hall Freemason, Medgar Evers,

from the Bob Dylan song on the point in their game and all that.

He was a Prince Hall Freemason.

Rosa Parks was a member of a female Masonic organization

and both her father and her grandfather were Prince Hall Mason.

So it's got a long history of involvement in civil rights

and what they call uplift endeavors.

Doesn't that tell you something about the NAACP?

It's a club for people who like joining and doing things

and being activists and meeting like-minded people

and that ultimately more than anything else.

The rituals are fun for a lot of people.

Maybe there are people who believe in them,

but I get the sense from your book,

looking at the great span of Freemasonry,

that actually it's clubbable.

There's an awful lot of clubbable, public-spirited kind of people

and also people who are ambitious,

who want to meet people who will help them as in Italy or wherever.

That's the core business.

I wouldn't underestimate the power of that sense of the sacred.

You know, he does tend to underestimate that, right?

You know, as I've tried to...

Freemason partly about death

and it's about coming to terms with death,

together with your mates in those rituals.

That is at the core of many religions.

Bertrand Russell said that the core work of all religion

is dealing with fear.

We shouldn't forget as well that Freemasonry,

as well as in any however we might define Freemasonry

in any sort of vaguely narrow sense,

it's not just that that's influential.

Freemasonry is an organisational template.

This idea of a society of men, a brotherhood of men, fraternity,

linked by rituals and a certain mythology,

organised in cells but with access to a much broader network,

that's Freemason.

But it also gives its origins to the Sicilian mafia.

The Sicilian mafia very much has Masonic DNA

in its origins and its beginnings.

And tons of other organisations have borrowed that Masonic template,

the Ku Klux Klan, millions of other fraternal organisations,

the Mormon Church has lots and lots of stuff.

The history of the early history of the Mormon Church

and the history of Freemasonry are very closely intertwined.

It's such a fascinating way of...

Basically all post-18th century history is there to some degree, isn't it?

There are masons everywhere.

You mentioned Roosevelt.

What was Roosevelt?

A 32nd degree?

Yeah, that's right.

So he had gone through 32 rituals or whatever.

Yeah, although that is the Scottish Rite,

which is the most elaborate system of rituals.

And there are tons of these things.

But yeah, these days it's fairly easy going through it.

They make it easy for you to go through all those rituals.

They're kind of performed for you.

Still.

Often in...

But I mean, the list of...

Let's end by just listing some of the people who've been Masonists.

So five kings of England, you say.

14 presidents of the United States.

Robert Burns.

Arthur Conan Doyle.

Goethe.

Mozart, we've mentioned.

Hayden.

Sibelius.

Arnold Palmer.

Sugar Ray Robinson.

Peter Sellers.

Nat King Cole.

Oliver Hardy.

Henry Ford.

Cecil Rose.

Cecil Duke Ellington.

And the Duke of Wellington.

Amazing.

It is pretty amazing.

So as Dominic said, all of history is there.

And your book is kind of, therefore, not just about the Freemasons,

but about the world since the early modern period.

So that's the craft, how the Freemasons made the modern world.

John, thanks so much.

It was absolutely wonderful.

My pleasure.

And of course, if you've listened to this and you think it was a bit too soft on Freemasonry, then that's proof that we're all secretly Freemasons.

We've been lying to you all along.

And if you think we've been too harsh, then you're a Freemason and you know that we're not.

Everybody's a winner.

Everybody will come away.

Everyone comes away a little bit disappointed, which is how we like it on The Rest is History.

And on that note, thank you, John.

And goodbye, everybody.

We'll see you next time.

Goodbye.

Bye-bye.

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